
COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

THE RELATIONAL
COACHING FIELD BOOK

EDITED BY ERIK DE HAAN
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CHAPTER 6

LEARNING IN EXECUTIVE COACHING RELATIONSHIPS: A BEHAVIOURAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

MAX VISSER

ABSTRACT

In recent research the strength and nature of the relationship between coaches and executives appears as a critical success factor in successful coaching outcomes. However, little theory has as yet been devoted to an analysis of how relationships are used in executive coaching. Such an analysis requires going from the monadic, individual level of analysis to the dyadic, relational level. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse learning in executive coaching relationships at this dyadic level of analysis. Conceptually, this analysis draws on a combination of the behavioural (Skinner) and systems (Bateson) perspectives. A verbatim of a coaching conversation serves as an illustration. It is found that the behavioural and systems perspectives may be fruitfully combined in one behavioural systems perspective. This perspective and its outcomes add to and can be clearly distinguished from the more common humanistic, psychodynamic and cognitive perspectives to executive coaching.

INTRODUCTION

Executive coaching has become a blossoming field of activity in the past decade. With the advent of post-industrial forms of organisation and increasing levels of employee work competence and demands, CEOs and senior managers have become aware of the importance of their “people skills” and networking capabilities to maintain their positions and to prosper in their careers. Increasingly they engage executive coaches to help them

develop these skills and capabilities, increase their organisational effectiveness and consider appropriate career steps (De Haan 2008a and b; Hall et al. 1999; Thach & Heinselman 1999).

The growing dependence of executives on coaching poses challenges to the practice and scientific study of executive coaching. Regarding practice, the profession of executive coach is not (yet) protected by law or subject to norms and regulation by a strong professional community. This means that anybody can decide to become an executive coach, regulated only by market conditions and the spread of good or bad rumours regarding one's coaching achievements. Given the coaches' positions of relative influence *vis-à-vis* executives, there are some "very real dangers" involved in current executive coaching practices (Berglas 2002; Hall et al. 1999; Thach & Heinselman 1999).

Partly to alleviate these dangers, the scientific study of executive coaching has sought to establish empirical relations between executive coaching efforts and coaching outcomes. Similarly as in medicine and psychotherapy, researchers strive to identify evidence-based coaching practices and attempt to translate these into programs for continuing professional development of coaches (De Haan 2008b; Feldman & Lankau 2005).

In these studies the relationship between coach and executive increasingly has received attention. Forming and maintaining a strong and productive relationship with clients has been identified as a critical success factor in successful coaching outcomes, slightly more than professional attitude and working methods of the executive coach (Bluckert 2005b; Kilburg 1996; Wasylyshyn 2003). The relationship is considered as the prime vehicle of the influence executive coaches may have on their clients (De Haan 2008a; Hall et al. 1999).

Important as the relationship is considered to be, little theory and research has as yet been devoted to the analysis of how relationships are used in executive coaching. Most students of executive coaching inquire into the ways coaches and executives as individuals perceive and experience the coaching relationship, into what they individually learn, and into the qualities of coaches and executives that influence these perceptions and experiences (e.g. Berg & Karlsen 2007; De Haan 2008a and b; Feldman & Lankau 2005; Hall et al. 1999).

This individualist orientation is reinforced by most of the theoretical perspectives in the field, i.e. humanistic, psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioural and systems (De Haan & Burger 2005). Of these, the humanistic and psychodynamic perspectives appear to be favoured by most researchers and practitioners (e.g. Bluckert 2005b; Hall et al. 1999; Kets de Vries 2006). Some propose an eclectic perspective (Berg & Karlsen 2007), while others appear to follow a combination of psychodynamic and systems perspectives (De

Haan 2008a and b; Kilburg 1996). The humanistic, cognitive and psychodynamic perspectives centre on the individual as object of analysis, inquiring into individual needs, attitudes and cognitions. However, if we want to analyse how relationships are used as relationships in executive coaching, we need to go from the monadic, individual level of analysis to the dyadic, relational level. In this chapter I propose an analysis of learning in executive coaching at this dyadic level of analysis, drawing on a combined behavioural systems perspective.

Throughout this chapter I will define executive coaching as a professional relationship, in which the coach helps the executive in becoming more effective in work-related situations. As such, executive coaching is distinguished from consulting to the extent that executive coaching constitutes a more personal, in-depth involvement with executive development and effectiveness instead of a more general, superficial involvement with organisational development and effectiveness (Berman & Bradt 2006). Further, executive coaching is distinguished from psychotherapy, to the extent that executive coaching is more oriented towards improving personal work effectiveness and less towards addressing non-work issues, painful experiences or severe psychopathology (Bluckert 2005a; Gray 2006).

Further, throughout the chapter a verbatim, 'the coaching conversation', is used to illustrate the analysis from the behavioural systems perspective.* The sequences are numbered for reference in this chapter. The text in square brackets outlines the thoughts of the coach and author of the verbatim, here called Caroline, at the time of the exchange.

VERBATIM: 'THE COACHING CONVERSATION'

Ellen is a young, recently graduated account manager in an agency. Ellen has called on a coach, Caroline, because she is experiencing difficulties in her communication with colleagues and superiors which may jeopardise her career in the agency. In the current second session, Ellen expresses distress around an interaction she had the previous day with the managing director of the agency, Robert. Caroline tries to help Ellen to see herself from his perspective by inviting her to take part in the 'two chair exercise', where she tries to speak as Robert. The following exchange unfolds:

1. *Caroline: Shall we move you out of Robert and get you back to the coachee seat and see what you learnt from him...*

* The content of the verbatim was made available by courtesy of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching, with permission of the coach and coachee. Names were changed to safeguard privacy and anonymity. The interpretation of the events in the verbatim is the sole responsibility of the author of this chapter.

PART II

2. *Ellen: That's quite good. [Both laugh]*
3. *Caroline: ...or about him?*
4. *Ellen: Hmmm.*
5. *Caroline: ...or you can tell me how you felt first if you want, whatever comes to your mind.*
6. *Ellen: Hmmm. How it felt? It felt, hmmm, it's unusual; it's different because I am not in that position, I am never in that position. I don't get to speak to him so it's quite useful to have an insight of how it might be.*
7. *Caroline: [senses that the exercise has not engaged Ellen as it should and therefore explains her intention] Yes, because we never think of doing that, you know, of putting ourselves in somebody else's shoes and we've done a lot of that and that seems to be something that helps. So what else did you... did you get anything else from that, anything that you thought: "I've never looked at it from quite that perspective" perhaps... or not?*
8. *Ellen: Not really, I mean everything there, I kind of, I knew really [laughs] so... it's not new information, but it's helpful to see him from his point of view. Especially, I've been thinking that maybe he was only harsh with me because he was in a bad mood. I did think that but... I can't see any other reason for it really. Why would he want to do that...*
9. *Caroline: [feels as if she is getting some progress as Ellen is starting to reflect on the incident] And the way he arrived in your office, or in your area, saying "Come on, let's do this". It didn't sound like it was emotionally neutral to start with. You see what I mean. He was arriving... It started very emotionally charged.*
10. *Ellen: Does that mean that you think he was wound up?*
11. *Caroline: [feels she's being trapped into a logic she does not want to be trapped into. She has let himself state an opinion that seems to be transformed into letting Ellen off the hook without responsibility for the incident] Yeah, I think so, it sounded...*
12. *Ellen: That it had nothing to do with me.*

13. *Caroline:* [consciously tries to return to a more middle ground where Ellen might continue exploring what she contributed to the incident] *It doesn't sound like it, no. [Silence.] However, you know, if that happens a lot...*
14. *Ellen:* *It does. He does get wound up quite a lot. What it is, I don't know how to judge him or read him, I suspect so I can't really protect myself.*
15. *Caroline:* [starts mirroring what she sees, but then notices herself saying things that are too harsh and wondering why she is saying them] *I think, I think that's something I've heard several times from you, which is why I am getting you to see it from other people's perspectives. It seems you are not... you are unaware of how people see you or what they need... either you don't see it or you don't... or you see it but you don't pay attention to what it means... It's like you were deaf and dumb and you were just doing... deaf and blind sorry, yes, not hearing, not seeing and therefore your actions might hurt somebody or miss the, miss the target because you don't know where they are.*
16. *Ellen:* *I think that's also true on his part.*
17. *Caroline:* *Oh, yes.*
18. *Ellen:* *He doesn't... He is...*
19. *Caroline:* *He doesn't care.*
20. *Ellen:* *Yes, that's the truth.*
21. *Caroline:* *Although, do you not care as well? That could be the same reason...*
22. *Ellen:* *About how he...*
23. *Caroline:* *How other people are.*
24. *Ellen:* *No, I do. I do. That's the difference. I want to make a good impression so I do. [laugh]*
25. *Caroline:* [continues being challenging for no good reason except that Ellen seems to be slipping away from every exploration she tries to invite] *Not the same. Do you care about how people ARE? You may care about what people THINK of you, that's COMPLETELY different!*

26. *Ellen: What do you mean by how they are?*
27. *Caroline: [feels Ellen has 'caught her' and now she has to explain her challenge to her] Hmmmm. For example with him, Robert. You could see he was upset, or annoyed and really wound up so therefore not the right time to even engage, if he says "Let's look at it."*
28. *Ellen: HE, He came to see ME!*
29. *Caroline: [notices the emotion in Ellen's tone of voice, and interprets it as the beginnings of anger in the light of unfairness. She returns to her guiding intention as a way to re-establish the relationship] No, I know, I know. He came to see you and possibly saying "As you're in a rush, I can see it it's not the right time" or just this sort of... noticing he's in a certain mood. That's a... Yeah... [Pause] What's... I am trying to find a reason for why you don't notice what people have as moods...*
30. *Ellen: OK.*

This chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section the behavioural systems perspective is outlined and its concepts are applied to an analysis of learning in executive coaching, using the verbatim as an example. Finally, the chapter ends with discussion and conclusions.

A BEHAVIOURAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING

The behavioural systems perspective is largely based on the work of the British anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson and the American psychologist B.F. Skinner (De Haan & Burger 2005). Although not often considered together, their work shares several characteristics (Cullari & Redmon 1982; Visser 2003; 2010). Skinner (1957; 1974) developed an overall framework for the description, explanation and control of behaviour, in which he posited a radical environmentalism and firmly rejected mentalist explanations of behaviour. Bateson and the so-called Palo Alto group he assembled in the 1950s worked in a comparable non-mentalist framework, be it without adopting or explicitly referring to radical behaviourism. However, they considered their pragmatic theory of communication, with its strong emphasis on relationship and function, to be closer to mathematical logic than to mainstream psychology, with its strong emphasis on individuals and their mental states (Bavelas 2007; Sluzki & Ransom 1976; Watzlawick et al. 1967).

In his thinking on learning, Bateson (1972) adopted the ground rule that all biological systems (organisms and their social or ecological organisations)

are capable of adaptive change. Such change depends upon feedback loops, provided by natural selection and by individual reinforcement. Inherent in these loops is always trial-and-error and a mechanism of comparison. Trial necessarily involves some error, which is biologically and psychologically expensive. It follows that adaptive change always must be hierarchical. Since such change involves learning, it also follows that learning must be hierarchical. Learning processes then can be ordered at different levels, of which Bateson distinguished four. For the purpose of this article, two levels are especially relevant: proto-learning and deutero-learning.

PROTO-LEARNING

Proto-learning (also referred to by Bateson as learning I, simple learning, or operational learning) refers to the adaptation of behaviour in response to contingencies of reinforcement. This learning occurs in all classic and instrumental conditioning experiments inside and outside the psychological laboratories. Fundamental in proto-learning is Skinner's (1957; 1974) distinction between two forms of behaviour: respondent and operant. Respondent behaviour is reflexive in nature. It occurs as a direct response to a stimulus, such as when the sight of meat powder makes Pavlov's dog salivate automatically. Operant behaviour is non-reflexive in nature. It does not occur as a direct response to a stimulus but is spontaneously emitted by the organism from time to time. Operant behaviour has an effect on the organism's environment, to the extent that there are consequences attached to that behaviour. These consequences in their turn determine the likelihood of reoccurrence of the previously emitted behaviour. When this behaviour increases in frequency, the consequence is called reinforcement. When the behaviour decreases in frequency, the consequence is called punishment.

The relation between the consequences, the stimulus upon which a response occurs and the response itself is regarded as probabilistic or contingent and generally referred to as the contingencies of reinforcement. In this scheme, stimuli do not elicit responses. Instead they control responses by signalling to the organism that a certain response-reinforcement contingency is in effect which in the past has led to reinforcing consequences. Since these stimuli enable the organism to distinguish (or discriminate) a reinforcing situation from a non-reinforcing one, they are called discriminative stimuli. Further, the relation between response and reinforcement is also contingent, depending upon various schedules of reinforcement (Holland & Skinner 1961; Skinner 1974).

Skinner applied his radical behaviourism to animal and to human behaviour without modification. His most important application pertained to the interpretation of language, or verbal behaviour (Skinner 1957). In Skinner's

analysis this form of behaviour is, like all behaviour, under the control of environmental contingencies that are now social in nature, i.e. controlled by the verbal community to which the speaker belongs. Speaking words may have the function of operant response (with all possible positive or negative consequences attached to it) and of discriminative stimulus (setting the occasion for verbal responses of the listener). Thus in the verbatim, Caroline and Ellen, engaged in a coaching dialogue, each in turn serve as a reinforcer of speech or as a discriminative stimulus to the other, according to Skinner.

For such proto-learning to occur, it must be assumed that the context of learning can be repeated at different points in time. Without this assumption, all learning would be necessarily of the zero-order kind, i.e. fully genetically determined. To account for contextual change, Bateson (1972) introduced the term 'context marker'. It denotes a signal that informs an organism that context [A] of stimulus [a] is different from context [B] of stimulus [a] and therefore elicits a different response, even though the stimulus remains the same. For example, the question "How was your work today?" is responded to differently in the context of family evening dinner than in the context of a coaching conversation.

From the assumption of repeatable contexts it also follows that for every organism the sequence of life events is in some way segmented or punctuated into contexts, which may be differentiated or equated by the organism. The distinction between stimulus, response and reinforcement in an experimental setup here attains the status of a hypothesis about how the experimental subject punctuates that sequence: "in Learning I, every item of... behaviour may be stimulus, response or reinforcement according to how the total sequence of interaction is punctuated" (Bateson 1972, p. 292; Bateson & Jackson 1968).

DEUTERO-LEARNING

Deutero-learning (also referred to by Bateson as learning II, learning to learn, or Gestalt learning) refers to changes in proto-learning as a result of insight in the structure (or class) of the situation in which proto-learning takes place. Such learning acquires particular importance in the field of human relations. Bateson emphasises that relations have no 'thing' quality in themselves, but are immanent in the exchange of messages: "the messages constitute the relationship" (Bateson 1972, p. 275). Here deutero-learning implies the learning of characteristic patterns of contingency (or contexts of conditioning) in a relationship.

Context in a relation is introduced in two ways. First, a message, sent by one person, sets the context for a certain class of response by the other person. Second, insofar as such messages are verbal, the non-verbal signs in

interaction function as a context marker of the verbal message, therefore as a context of context for the other person. This setting of contexts is inevitable in interpersonal exchange, since in interaction the categories stimulus, response and reinforcement are never 'empty'. All behaviours (verbal and non-verbal) occurring between persons who are conscious of each other's presence have (reinforcing or punishing) effects, whether intended or not. Such effects have interpersonal message value and thus are communicative in nature. It follows that in interaction it is impossible not to behave, and therefore impossible not to communicate (Bavelas 1990; Critchley 2010; Visser 2007a; Watzlawick et al. 1967). In the verbatim, in sequence 24–25, Ellen's laughing appears to convey a non-verbal message to Caroline that she is not taking her perspective very seriously, to which Caroline non-verbally responds by raising her voice. Similarly, in sequence 28–29 Ellen's emotional outburst appears to convey a powerful non-verbal message to Caroline that her prodding transcends the limits of the definition of their relationship as complementary and co-operative, which is fairly common in coaching.

Similar to Skinner, Bateson noted that all references to mental states can be redefined in terms of transactions (or relations) between persons and their social and physical environment. In such transactions one can readily discover contexts of proto-learning that bring about that deutero-learning to which the mental state refers. In relationships, stimuli, responses and reinforcements acquire meaning in contingency patterns of interaction. These patterns are defined by the participants as certain characteristics of the relation, depending upon their subjective punctuation of events (Bateson 1963; 1972; Bateson & Jackson 1968). In the verbatim the relationship is characterised by attempts by Caroline to make Ellen explore her own responsibility in communicating to Robert and by attempts by Ellen to evade this exploration. The harder Caroline pushes, the more Ellen evades, for example by seizing the opportunity to blame Robert for being "wound up" (sequences 9–10, 10–11), by laughing (sequence 24–25), and finally by apparently becoming angry (sequence 27–28). When Caroline backs down, she appears to return to a less emotional state (sequence 29–30). From Ellen's subjective punctuation, this may lead to an initial interpretation of Caroline's behaviour as 'concerned', but later on as 'pushy' or even 'intrusive'. From Caroline's subjective punctuation, we are able to discern her interpretation of Ellen's behaviour as 'evasive' and 'slippery'.

Patterns in interaction may develop into rules or stabilised definitions of the relationship between coach and executive (Haley 1963; Watzlawick et al. 1967). In the verbatim, Caroline and Ellen have defined their relationship as complementary and co-operative. The issues that Ellen proposes are leading and Caroline adopts a helping and encouraging stance towards these issues

(e.g. sequences 5–6, 8–9, 12–13). However, feeling justified by the particular context of the session, Caroline increasingly adopts a more probing, almost inquisitive position (e.g. sequences 14–15, 24–25). At the end this appears to alter their definition of the relationship from complementary and co-operative into symmetrical and competitive (sequence 28–29), after which Caroline backs down (sequence 29–30).

Deutero-learning in human relations implies that subjects improve their ability to adapt to contexts of conditioning. For example, a person who is subject to a prolonged situation of classic conditioning will increasingly expect a world (context) in which signs of future reinforcements can be detected, but nothing can be done to influence the occurrence of reinforcement. In mental terms this person is likely to adopt an attitude of fatalism. Such experience with earlier contingency patterns in its turn leads to a habit of acting as if all new contexts exhibit the same pattern. This habit of expecting a certain punctuation of events tends to become self-validating (and hence self-fulfilling) by promoting certain behaviours and by discouraging others. Behaviours are thus not regarded as discrete events, with causation flowing in one direction only, but as interconnected events that are both cause and effect and, ultimately, their own cause (Bateson 1972; Visser 2007b; Watzlawick et al. 1967). In the verbatim, the particular behaviours that Caroline and Ellen display are interlocking and only fully intelligible with the knowledge of what went before and after those particular behaviours. For example, in sequence 27–28 Ellen's emotional outburst becomes intelligible from Caroline's insistent attempts to make her explore her own responsibility in communicating with Robert (sequences 6–7, 14–15, 24–25, 26–27) and Ellen's equally persistent attempts to evade this exploration (sequences 9–10, 13–14, 23–24).

Finally, deutero-learning in coaching relationships does not always lead to personal growth and development of the participants. Coach and executive improve their ability to adapt to contexts of conditioning as they are presented to them, but such adaptation may range from more to less healthy. Executives may become overly dependent upon their coach, which may give the coach direct influence on the executive's business decisions (Berglas 2002; Visser 2007a and b). In the verbatim, such a situation does not seem to occur. It is only the second coaching session between Caroline and Ellen, and Ellen does not appear to be particularly dependent upon Caroline. Whenever Caroline pushes Ellen and attempts to influence her more directly, either she manages to evade Caroline's attempts or Caroline retreats somewhat, sensing that she is jeopardising their relationship. There are no signs that withdrawal from this coaching relationship is difficult for Ellen (or Caroline).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Analysing learning in executive coaching from a behavioural systems perspective provides coaches with three important lessons that appear to be less covered by the other perspectives to executive coaching and related fields.

A first lesson is: interactions may shape mental states. The humanistic, psychodynamic and cognitive perspectives tend to emphasise the important causal role of individual needs, attitudes and cognitions in steering behaviour. The behavioural systems perspective to coaching argues that these mental states can often fruitfully be redefined as collateral products of specific interaction patterns between coach and executive. While these patterns give rise to subjective mental interpretations, these should not be reified as immutable mental states or traits. Often interpretations constitute a form of retrospective sense-making: we emit a certain behaviour and afterwards we attribute mental meaning to it (Bem 1967; Skinner 1974; Weick 1979). For example, in the verbatim we see how the attitudes and cognitions of Caroline are shaped by the specific interactional dynamics of her exchange with Ellen. Sometimes her intentions appear to follow her behaviour, sometimes her behaviour appears to follow her intentions.

A second lesson is: concentrate on the here and now of behaviour don't always look for past causes. The psychodynamic and (to some extent) humanistic perspectives tend to emphasise the role of past unresolved psychic conflicts, repressed drive tendencies and thwarted growth needs in current behavioural problems. The behavioural systems perspective argues that coaches should concentrate more on the here and now of behavioural problems. They should deal with them in real time in the current setting of the relationship between coach and executive. Often psychodynamic mechanisms like defence, transference and repression directly translate into interpersonal patterns and experiences (Thomas et al. 2007; Westerman 1998). For example, in the verbatim, Ellen's 'defensiveness' may directly manifest itself in response to Caroline's particular approach to this coaching conversation, pushing hard to learn Ellen to assume responsibility.

A third lesson is: it is impossible not to manipulate in coaching, so use this as a beneficent tool. The humanistic, psychodynamic and cognitive perspectives have often objected to the behavioural systems perspective as being overtly manipulative and thus detrimental to humanistic values like free will and voluntary choice, sometimes invoking literary examples like Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* or Huxley's *Brave New World* (e.g. Huczynski & Buchanan 2010, p. 164; Kreitner et al. 2002, pp. 273–4; Locke 1977). The behavioural systems perspective has countered these objections by pointing out the impossibility of not communicating in relationships. Reciprocal

PART II

influencing is inevitable whenever people meet in a coaching or other social context. Further, the behavioural systems perspective does not question free will and voluntary choice on philosophical grounds, but argues that, empirically speaking, individual choices often are more influenced by contextual factors than most people are willing to realise (Gray 1979; Haley 1963; Skinner 1974; Watzlawick et al. 1967). For example, in the verbatim all verbal and non-verbal behaviours displayed by Caroline and Ellen can be regarded as forms of conscious or subconscious manipulation of one other.

Coaches using the behavioural systems perspective will accept this impossibility not to manipulate and use it for improving the coaching relationship and helping the coachee. By providing and focusing on contextual influences these coaches increase the awareness of coachees of their current behaviour and its impact on and from the context. This makes it possible to influence their behaviour in more positive directions and to provide enduring relief in a relatively brief period of time.

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